



## THOUGHTS ON CONSERVATION

# DECIPHERING WOODCOCK WINGS

## *Lessons from the Woodcock Wing-Collection Survey*

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*Come May or June, our thoughts tend to be with the season at hand – trout fishing, dipping smelts, spring turkey hunting, rhubarb pie and getting the garden ready for tomato plants if we hope for them to ripen before the first frost. Of course, those activities illustrate my northern roots, so please feel free to substitute bass, red fish, a crawfish boil or picking your already-ripening tomatoes according to your latitude. Also by this time, many avid woodcock hunters are far along on plans for the coming autumn's pursuits, and perhaps also keeping an eye on the local nesting woodcock. But for 1,200 or so woodcock hunters, a trip to the mailbox in late spring can yield a delivery that will bring back memories of last fall's hunts and spur timberdoodle discussions among serious bird hunting buddies.*



*This shows all wingbee biologists attending in Karnack, Texas in 2014. Photo by Tom Cooper, USFWS.*



Of course, I'm talking about the results of the woodcock wing-collection survey. Every spring each participating hunter receives a summary page of the woodcock wings he or she submitted the previous hunting season, reporting the sex and age of each woodcock whose wing was sent in. It also lists the date, state and county where the bird was harvested. Reading down the page won't mean much to the average Joe (or Jolene), but for the wing-collection participant who reads between the lines, it can read like a hunting travelog. For some of us, it's cause to pour a cup of coffee, sit down with a good bird dog lying underfoot and savor again certain moments from the woodcock coverts. And while saying "thank you" and encouraging continued participation is the reason Uncle Sam sent the wing summary, providing feel-good moments is not the reason for conducting the wing collection survey.

Our good uncle in the form of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is responsible for providing coordinated, comprehensive management of migratory game birds, including American woodcock. To do this requires reliable annual information on woodcock abundance, hunter harvest, recruitment (reproduction) and distribution. This is no easy task for many game birds, particularly cryptic birds such as woodcock that reside in dispersed, densely forested habitats and, unlike many waterfowl species, do not congregate in large flocks. Changes in abundance of the woodcock population are monitored by the Singing-Ground Survey. The Harvest Information Program (HIP) samples woodcock hunters to estimate woodcock harvest and days spent hunting. It is the woodcock Wing-Collection Survey (WCS) that provides the annual index of woodcock recruitment.

The woodcock Wing-Collection Survey began in 1963 with the primary purpose of providing information on the reproductive success of American woodcock. From the wings we can determine the age and sex of the bird, and use that information from all the birds to calculate the ratio of immature woodcock per adult female in the harvest. This is the recruitment index.

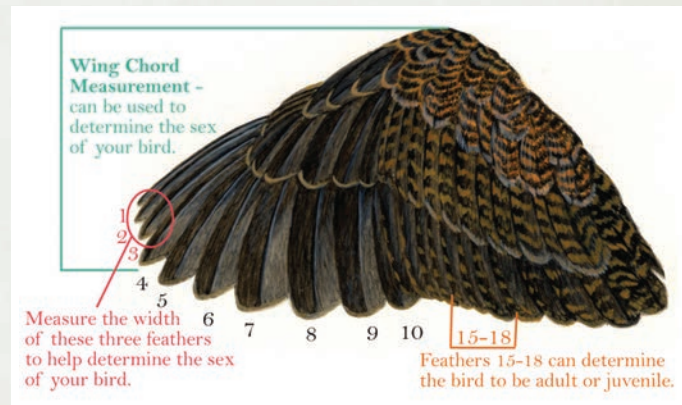
*Thoughts on Conservation, continued on page 50*

The WCS is a collaborative effort of the USFWS, state wildlife agencies and woodcock hunters. Participating hunters are those who have participated in prior year's surveys and a subset of hunters who indicated on the HIP survey that they had hunted woodcock. Each participating hunter is provided with pre-paid envelopes in which to send one wing from each woodcock he or she kills; hunters are asked to record the date, state and county where the bird was harvested. That's simple enough, but here are some suggestions to participating hunters of things NOT to do: 1) never, EVER, put the wings in plastic bags or foil before putting them in the mailer envelope. Moisture cannot escape the plastic or foil, and moisture plus meat, blood and feather yields a smelly mess; 2) if the wing is wet or blood-smeared, first rinse off the blood and dry it before putting in the envelope; and 3) if there's a choice, submit the wing that's in better shape of the two. Clean, dry wings are much easier to examine, and much more pleasant, too.

All those wings are sent to the USFWS Division of Migratory Bird Management in Laurel, Maryland where they are put in a freezer to await the annual Woodcock Wingbee. What is a wingbee? A quick internet search for the definition of "bee" results in this: "A meeting for communal work or amusement". Indeed, the annual wingbee is a communal work meeting of federal, state and private biologists, and there often is some amusement at this annual reunion as well. During one week in late winter after the woodcock seasons have closed, usually sometime in March, about 20 biologists congregate to examine 12 to 15 thousand (12,000 to 15,000) wings submitted by hunters during the previous woodcock season. It's a gathering of woodcock biologists from across the country – Maine to Minnesota, (the Gulf Coast to the Atlantic) Louisiana to the southern Appalachians. Some of the veteran biologists have been attending the wingbees for 20 years or more, and a few retired biologists continue to attend and lend their expertise. In addition to conducting the business of the wingbee, these passionate biologists enjoy face-to-face discussions of the latest woodcock research and conservation. The location varies from year to year, usually alternating between north and south. Recent host states include Vermont (this year), Texas, Indiana, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Minnesota.

The wingbee commences on a Tuesday morning with an overview and training session conducted by USFWS biologist Tom Cooper, who is the Eastern Migratory and Upland Game Bird Specialist and co-chair of the Woodcock Task Force. After a period of practicing the techniques of determining the age and sex of a collection of known age and sex wings, each biologist must pass a proficiency test before he or she can begin processing the wings submitted by hunters. We use the same techniques for aging and sexing woodcock at the wingbee as described in the RGS-published booklet, *A Woodcock in the Hand*, with the obvious exception that we don't have a body we can weigh or bill to measure.

For each envelope of wings, the age and sex for each wing is deciphered and recorded; then the information of woodcock age and sex, date and location for each envelope is entered into a computer database. At times the activity at the wingbee resembles that of a beehive on a warm summer day. Occasionally a note from a hunter is found within an envelope and is shared among



## AGING AND SEXING WOODCOCK

With a little practice it's not too difficult to determine the age and sex of most woodcock wings if you know where to look. Female woodcock have longer wings than males, and the outer 3 "primary" wing feathers of a female are wider than those of a male. Immature woodcock have a more symmetrical, arrow-shaped "secondary" flight feather, with a dark subterminal band adjacent to a fairly even, bright buffy band along the tip. An adult secondary has uneven and much less-distinct dark and buffy bands, one side of the feather's mid-rib (rachis) is noticeably wider than the other, and the feather usually has a more "faded" look. You can find a guide to aging and sexing woodcock from RGS and AWS, *A Woodcock in the Hand*, for sale on the RGS-Mart: [www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/shoppingcart/magento/](http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/shoppingcart/magento/).

the wingbee crew. Often the writer is commenting on a good hunting experience, the number of birds moved or apologizing for a lack of shooting prowess (i.e. just one wing in the envelope). Once in a while, a note is heart-wrenching, such as the writer proclaiming this to be the last season for the aging dog or hunter.

As a biologist, processing envelope after envelope of wings – perhaps several hundreds of wings – one can form an impression from the relative frequency of immature wings and adult female wings, of the previous year's woodcock production. However, our impressions, based on a limited, non-representative sample of wings, always seem to differ from the final statistic for a management region or the country as a whole. Part of this difference, in addition to the vagaries of the human mind, is there are regions of the woodcock range where immature woodcock are harvested at a greater frequency, such as in the Delmarva-New Jersey area – an important migration corridor – and in Louisiana, an important part of the wintering range. The results of the woodcock wingbee are reported annually in *American Woodcock Population Status*, published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and available online (<http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/Woodcock-Facts#PopStat>). This annual status report usually becomes available in July, so once again avid woodcock hunters have occasion to mull woodcock conservation and to see how their observations compare to the big picture. So if the USFWS asks you to participate in the WCS, I encourage you to do so. By doing so, you'll be doing a little something extra to support conservation of this wonderful bird. And besides, it's interesting and a heck of a lot of fun! 🐦